

"Help! What Is Wrong With These Literature Circles and How Can We Fix Them?"

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By using positive discussion strategies and creating safe and supportive communities around books, teachers can promote student relationships outside of the classroom as well

Picture a U.S. urban classroom brimming wall to wall with bookshelves on which hundreds of books poke out from baskets, each worn thin from passionate readers but begging to be read again. Picture a literacy consultant and a teacher working together for multiple years on literacy instruction that would inspire, accelerate, and captivate at-risk readers. Picture hours and hours of work preparing students to engage with these books, hold vibrant discussions in literature circles, and create meaningful communities around texts. And now compare these images with the following scene taken from one group of sixth graders discussing *Freak the Mighty* (Philbrick, 2001). Keep in mind that the students (all student names are pseudonyms) in this example had been engaged in literature circles since fourth grade and were familiar with book groups and prepared to discuss the text; however, as Jennifer (the teacher) pulled back from this group, and I (the literacy consultant) videotaped the discussion, we were both surprised to see that the group did not proceed as expected. For us this scene, along with many others, seemed disjointed from earlier discussion groups and caused us to exclaim, "Help! What is wrong with these literature circles and how can we fix them?"

Evan: Dale got to read (from his role sheet). Go ahead Dale.

Dale: I didn't like when they—(Evan gets up and grabs Dale's shoe and holds it up to the camera)

Evan: (interrupts) Dale wears his K-Swiss!

Dale: Yeah, I did—I hate you for that.

Evan: Yeah, right!

Rashaad: (ignoring Dale and Evan) If you were reading this to young children, is there something they would not understand? (reading from role sheet)

Evan: That Freak is little and he is always being mean to people but when you get to know him—he's smart.

Rashaad: Anybody else got one?

Evan: Hey, *you* got one? (pointing to another member and in a menacing tone)

Micah: Nah. (avoiding Evan's stare and shaking his head)

Evan: Come on Dale, swing those K-Swiss—I'm ready for you boy!

Dale: I think they will not understand why Evan is so mean.

The boys in this group were supposed to be discussing their role sheets that they had prepared on *Freak the Mighty*. Instead, however, Evan used this opportunity to bully Dale about his shoes. Later when watching this tape, Dale confessed that the reason Evan picked on him was,

Because my family got to spend money on food and bills, we save up our allowance. Evan might not, but we do 'cause we want to buy new shoes. I bought these (pointing to his feet) two years ago—that is why they look so disgusting right now.

The teacher and I thought we had given the students the skills to productively discuss a text, but as soon as we pulled away to let them lead the group on their own instances like the previous example became far too frequent. For example, in another group that I was videotaping, what started as a civil discussion about the book rapidly declined into chaos when one boy called a girl “retarded.” In turn, the girl responded, “Shut up! You boy don’t know even how to dress yourself.” This conversation never got back on track as comments such as “Rahsean really stinks right now, but like I was saying...” permeated the rest of the group’s discussion. In another group, two students continued kicking each other throughout the meeting, which caused both students to miss questions asked by other members and impeded their ability to engage with the text, not to mention disrupted other members. These examples were by no means the only indicators of groups that were spiraling out of control, and as Jennifer and I viewed the tapes of these discussions we were left with troubling questions. First, we wondered why these literature circles did not go as planned and why they deteriorated into tension-filled book groups marred by class inequities, bullying, name-calling, kicking, and threats. Second, we wanted to know what we could do to fix these fledgling book groups.

In this article, I explore what happens when, despite endless hours of teaching and explaining how literature circles work, students still struggled with appropriating the basic skills of positive social interaction. First, I begin by establishing a rationale for why literature circles are a meaningful addition to a literacy classroom. Next, I elaborate on the context of this classroom and highlight the difficulties that the teacher faced in implementing this practice. Finally, I explore some adaptations that the teacher and I made to improve this practice. I hope, through this article, to identify some issues that work against conducting successful book groups. And I suggest some possible changes to assist others who also need help figuring out what is wrong with their literature circle discussions and what to do to improve them.

Rationale for Using Literature Circles in the Classroom

Jennifer said, “I use literature circles in my classroom because I feel that the students enjoy and understand

books so much more. Literature circles provide for great discussions about books and get students to want to read.” In 1994, Daniels published his first book about literature circles. Since this publication, the information on literature circles has grown as many teachers and researchers have seen these discussion groups as an important addition to a literacy curriculum. Gambrell (2004) asserted, “In the past three decades interest in this discussion practice has blossomed as evidenced by the increase in the number of journal articles and conference papers on the topic” (p. 212). Why did this instructional practice become so popular? One reason is that book groups capture the belief that reading is transactional (Rosenblatt, 1978), and that meaning is not just found in the text or a reader’s head but also in the transaction between the text and the reader. Many educators saw the need to move away from traditional teacher-centered instruction in favor of creating more student-centered opportunities for learning in their classrooms. Almasi (1995) stated, “students who talk about what they read are more likely to engage in reading” (p. 20). Furthermore, many educators saw the need to add more social interaction in their classrooms. Based on the Vygotskian notion that learning develops through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1934/1978) and the research that collaboration and group work can lead to positive consequences (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), many teachers felt that using literature circles could help increase positive social learning opportunities in the classroom. Finally, there has been research in support of this strategy stating that it can increase comprehension, improve higher-level thinking, and foster quality responses to text (Almasi, 1995; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Sweigart, 1991).

Many teachers look to literature circles to assist them in creating a positive learning community as well as to provide a context for engaged, student-directed, and meaning-making literacy experiences. Because a main goal of literature circles is to promote trust and respect for multiple voices and opinions, one of its significant foundations is providing a supportive and safe environment. Schlick Noe and Johnson (1999) emphasized, “Successful literature circles depend on a classroom climate in which everyone feels valued” (p. 7). Therefore, nourishing a climate of collaboration and respect is key to the success of this instructional practice (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). In many of our classrooms, however, establishing a safe environment for students to engage in this process is not always as easy as it seems. This article

highlights the external difficulties that one teacher encountered when she tried implementing literature circles in her sixth-grade classroom. Sociocultural forces such as economic disparities, strong student animosity, and racial and gender tension had powerful influences on how these students discussed texts, despite the teacher's best attempts to create a safe and trusting environment. In addition to these student issues, the teacher also struggled with structural difficulties (e.g., switching classes, revolving students, constant interruptions, different teaching styles) that affected these discussions. In this classroom, we learned that creating an "interpretive community" to foster a transactional textual experience was not as easy as it looks in the books. Hence, we had to make significant adjustments in order to help students find common ground within a 90-minute reading block in order to encourage productive discussions. Through thoughtful minilessons, whole-group modeling, and carefully chosen books, we persevered in order to use this space of literature circles as one that could not only improve reading but also foster respect in an environment where respect was not a given.

Context

As you listen to the voices of Jennifer's students struggling with literature circles it is important that you understand the context. The school where Jennifer teaches is a struggling kindergarten through eighth-grade school in a U.S. urban neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio. It has been designated as a school in Academic Emergency with fourth- and sixth-grade statewide test scores hovering at 48% and 94% of students qualifying for free or reduced-cost lunch.

The school is in one of the many disadvantaged neighborhoods in this city where median income barely reaches above minimum wage. The adults in the neighborhood surrounding the school have the highest population in the city with less than a 12th-grade education (62%). The neighborhood also has the highest high school dropout rate in the city (58%; Wagner, 2000). The community's racial population is 94% white and 4% African American; however, the school does not reflect this division. Recent enrollment figures indicate that 51% of students were white and 44% were African American. Forced racial integration has changed the school makeup and has led to some tension in the neighborhood, which permeates the school as well.

The streets around the school are lined with large, brick row homes that are boarded up or have broken windows. The cracked sidewalks are frequently littered with trash and sagging telephone wires. As part of a writing activity for fifth graders, I asked the students to write a description of their community. Dale responded, "It is a dirty neighborhood, there was a shooting in my backyard. There is a store on the corner that got robbed two times." Kelly echoed, "It's dirty with too much drugs. There are bad kids, abandoned buildings; it stinks like fish, people getting killed and stray cats."

For the whole school year of 2004–2005, I was a researcher in this classroom studying how students discussed literature as part of a three-year qualitative study. I had followed this classroom for two previous years and had worked with Jennifer during the students' fourth- and sixth-grade years. Jennifer was a dedicated and hard-working teacher committed to working with high-poverty students. She was well regarded in the school as a result of her students' high proficiency scores and always took opportunities to improve her instructional practices. However, as we realized, even the best laid plans and intentions can be fraught with what sometimes appears to be insurmountable hurdles.

Why the Literature Circle Difficulties?

There were many reasons why these literature circles were not going as planned in this classroom. One of the main difficulties was the tension in the classroom. There was a pervasive feeling of hostility between the students, and many of their everyday interactions seemed to be punctuated by verbal assaults such as "stupid" and "ugly," as if these words were to be routinely attached to the end of a sentence. To illustrate a typical example, one day two boys were next to each other at the pencil sharpener. They started to push each other, and one boy walked back and stated, "Just to let you know, I am about to punch his face in because he's talking about my mama." Many times the issues were rooted in racial, class, or gender tensions. I observed many discussion groups being derailed over who wore the same shirt every day, who had lice because they were dirty, what boy "dissed"

what girl, and who could not sit next to whom for a whole host of reasons. This hostility seemed to come from beyond the classroom walls, and we were observing the bubbling up of larger tensions. For example, once during the year the teachers had to call the police about some girls who were having trouble in the hall because an issue that was rooted in a neighborhood dispute was spilling into the classroom. There were also two incidents of actual fistfights that broke out during literature circle discussions over issues that came into the classroom with the students. This tension seemed to reside just below the surface and frequently erupted to work against creating a community of learners. We found that it was hard to create a feeling of safety and security when outside the classroom walls students were used to solving issues with force and threats. We began to wonder if it was realistic for us to expect kids to have discussions as a community of learners when they could not even coexist in their own neighborhoods.

Discursive Difficulties

In addition to these negative feelings, the students also seemed to struggle with performing the necessary discursive moves that define positive discussions. In a previous study, with many of the same students as fourth graders, I analyzed literature circle conversations to see how students used language to create a feeling of community, how students used language to stay on task, and how gender equitable their interactions were (Clarke, 2004). Through my analysis, I found that these students really struggled with maintaining a positive discursive environment. For example, many of their language practices dominated discussion groups, such as giving orders, using insults, and disagreeing. They also participated in many more examples of sidetracking and off-task behavior that disrupted the flow of the discussion. The boys, in particular, sidetracked the most. They also engaged in competitive interruptions and switched roles in their groups.

Many discursive practices are supported by classroom instruction and community language practices. It is important to note, however, that students need opportunities to develop necessary conversational skills; otherwise, by the time they get to the middle grades and are expected to converse in a student-led literature discussion they will not have the discursive competence to be successful with this type of activity.

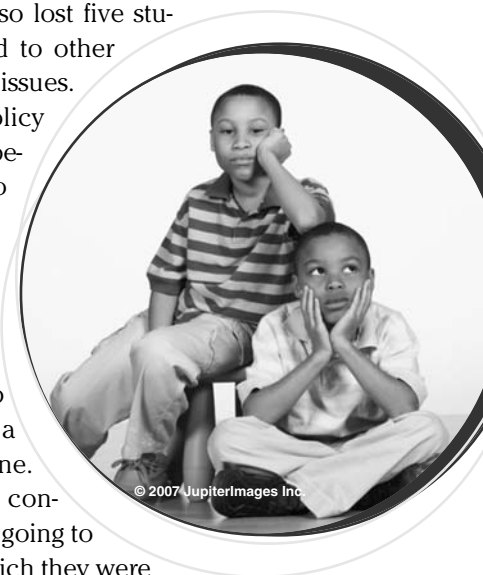
Structural Barriers

In addition to the fact that a 90-minute language arts period did not give Jennifer much time for community building, there were other barriers that stood in her way. For example, one difficulty was the “revolving door” of students who entered and exited her classroom. According to my field notes, by December the class had six new students, some who had been switched from another classroom as well as a couple from other schools. The classroom also lost five students, and many switched to other classrooms for behavioral issues.

This revolving-door policy worked against the teacher because she continually had to orient new students and adjust to new classroom dynamics. This school also had a high rate of absenteeism, which made it difficult to keep kids caught up on the readings and build a consistent classroom routine. In addition, students were constantly getting in fights and going to in-school suspension in which they were pulled out of class for days at a time. All of this contributed to Jennifer’s frustrations at trying to build a community.

Not only did Jennifer struggle with keeping students in her class and out of in-school suspension, but she also had to deal with constant interruptions. By December, the students’ instructional time had been interrupted by no fewer than seven celebratory events and three long-term testing periods. The students had events such as Parent Handbook Day, Fun Day, Farm Day, Thanksgiving Assembly, field trips, Transportation Day, and Lewis and Clark Day. Also, students had a week of citywide benchmark assessments and Terra Nova testing. The interruptions only increased with the spring statewide testing weeks and multiple other days—Muffins for Moms, Donuts for Dads, and Luau Day. Jennifer complained of her limited teaching time as a result of constant interruptions that worked against building consistency and routines.

Another mitigating factor in the difficulty in creating a supportive community was the switching of classes. Starting in fourth grade, the students switched between three teachers for their core content classes. Accounting for the different teaching styles of the stu-



dents' teachers also presented a difficulty. For example, one day Jennifer exclaimed that the students' science teacher frustrated her. Science was just before her class, and she claimed that when the students entered her room they seemed like they were always in a hurry and were very competitive. She attributed some of this to the science teacher, who used a lot of team games and stressed quickness in completion of assignments. She stated that sometimes it was hard to get kids to settle down and sit and talk when they had just spent an hour working quickly and individually. This raises another issue of how to create a community of learners in a setting where the students are switching classrooms and receiving instructional styles that dramatically differ. As middle-grade content becomes more challenging and the need for specialized teachers increases, it is important to realize how switching teachers and teaching styles can work against achieving group cohesion. Jennifer often felt that all of her hard work to build a community was dissolved as soon as the students walked out the door, and the next day she would need to start again.

Ways to Improve Literature Circles

As the year progressed so too did our frustrations with creating meaningful instructional practices that valued student voice, encouraged positive interactions, and fostered transactional reading opportunities. We were both committed to making this work and resisted the temptation to throw it all away in exchange for direct instruction and minimal student contact. However, we knew that these barriers were pretty powerful deterrents and that if we wanted literature circles to work we would need to make some changes. Jennifer and I brainstormed many ideas as we pondered how to get the literature circles back on track, and we made some changes that started to make a difference by improving this practice for all of our students.

Using Powerful Minilessons

As we began to reconsider literature circles in this classroom, our timing seemed perfect—Daniels and Steineke's (2004) book on minilessons for literature circles was published. Although they provide many powerful suggestions, we used two in particular that resulted in some success.

Starting With a Membership Grid. Given the feelings of hostility that existed between the students, we chose creating a membership grid as our first minilesson. Daniels and Steineke (2004) suggested starting off a group with this exercise to bring the members together around commonalities and develop a feeling of cohesion. We used their blank grid (found in the appendix) and filled it out with the following categories: favorite television show, favorite music group/singer, if you were stuck on an island what would you bring with you, and favorite thing to do on the weekend. (Daniels and Steineke have a more exhaustive list on page 39 of their book.) After the groups were formed, but before their first meeting, we had them come together to fill out this form. Even though they already knew one another, we felt that it was important to highlight some shared interests and build a positive relationship before they began their "official" business as a group. At first, like most other group activities in the classroom, this became a contentious activity. For example, in one group when discussing a favorite television show one member mentioned a show that the others thought was "stupid." There was lots of arguing over the best shows, which ended up in name-calling. We realized that this exercise was going to be difficult given the tenuous classroom relations. Instead of throwing this out as another failed project, however, the next day we backed up and became more explicit about why we were doing a membership grid and that the purpose of the activity was to develop respect and build a connection within the groups. First, I made each person write one new thing that he or she learned about a group member and present another group member to the class. Then we discussed all the things we had in common, which helped the students focus on the positives and similarities rather than argue about the differences. In addition, this also raised the students' awareness about group functioning and appreciating one another. At the end of the lesson, when I asked the students why we filled out the membership grid, one boy responded, "It helps us get to know each other and see what we have in common." Jennifer and I hoped these seedlings we planted would grow into better group relationships.

Sharing the Airtime. Because these students had a difficult time listening to one another, we also used the Sharing Air Time minilesson (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). At the beginning of each meeting I handed a

stack of poker chips to each group member. The rule was that each time a member spoke he or she had to place a poker chip in the middle of the table. When a student's poker chips were gone, he or she was out of the conversation. One of the main purposes of this minilesson was to raise students' awareness about how often they spoke and to equalize turns amongst group members. We also hoped that this would force group members to think before they spoke and engage in less off-track arguing and side conversations. The students were very interested in this new feature to their groups, and for most of the groups it worked beautifully. For example, one group had a very dominant member and this activity really forced her to think before she spoke, which gave the other students a chance to participate when they normally had to vie for a turn. Another group reflected upon their unequal stacks of poker chips at the end of the discussion and used this reflection to establish new ground rules for taking turns. Although the students were beginning to become more aware of their conversations and participation in their groups, we did have one group that used the poker chips in a mocking way. Two members of this group purposefully tried to lose their chips so they could be out for the day. Clearly, this group needed further intervention, but we believe this was a good activity to continue our classroom discussions about how to work productively with one another.

Giving Compliments. As previously mentioned, the students often ended verbal interactions with put-downs and insults; therefore, we tried a minilesson that was inspired by Daniels and Steineke's (2004) ideas of self-evaluation and defining discussion skills. Jennifer started to give the students practice in complimenting one another. For example, during a poetry unit Jennifer had students share poetry that they had written. After each poem, the rest of the class had to give the author a compliment. This strategy was then incorporated into our literature circle discussions. First, we started with a discussion technique adapted from Daniels and Steineke and called "what a Literature Circle looks like/sounds like" (pp. 48–54). The whole class brainstormed a list of characteristics of a good literature discussion group, and we made a big chart from it. We posted the chart next to the group when they had their next book discussion. After the discussion was over, we handed out a cutout of a hand and asked each student to give another member

a "hand" in the form of a compliment. Although some members took this opportunity to give backhanded compliments (e.g., "I give Jazzire a hand because she was behind in the story and never prepared, but today she was prepared"), overall most members began to say nice things to one another. For example, one student responded, "I give Taylor a hand because she was bringing up good questions for us to answer." Another student responded, "I give Nel a hand because she said something interesting and did a good job telling predictions." Although the students needed more work on giving compliments, this activity began pushing them in the right direction for establishing and maintaining a community of learners.

Watching Ourselves on Videotapes

We believed that our students were largely unaware of how their interactional patterns had negative effects on their discussions; therefore, to improve literature circles we video recorded group meetings and then watched these with individual members, whole groups, or the whole class to discuss how the conversations went and what could be improved. The students loved watching themselves on video, and it inspired many positive conversations about group relations. For example, all the members of the *Hush* (Woodson, 2002) group watched their conversation on tape. While watching themselves, Ali and Crystal became upset that Darnell talked too much. Afterward, we explored this reflection, addressed how one member could monopolize the conversation, and brainstormed how this group could discuss differently during their next meeting. Ali and Crystal vowed to talk more next time, and Darnell was more aware of how he frequently shut them out of the discussion. The next group meeting went more smoothly.

Through watching themselves on video, these students were beginning to critically reflect upon their group interactions and began to make strides toward changing their language practices within these literature circle discussions.

Choosing Good Books

The constant switching of classes and short time period made it all the more important for us to find books that captured our students' interest quickly and deeply. Providing choice is a key to successful literature circles, but it was also important to us to give the

students a choice of books that they wanted to read. Daniels (2002) stated that it is necessary to give students choice because the “deepest spirit of literature circles comes from independent reading” (p. 18) and that “for reading to become a lifelong habit and a deeply owned skill, it has to be voluntary” (p. 19). Although the teacher and I had given students choices in our past book discussion groups, we were choosing the books from which the students were to choose, and we realized that the books that we were choosing did not necessarily reflect the students’ interests. Therefore, we began to make a concerted effort to pick books that not only related to the students’ lives and interests but also facilitated meaty discussions (see Table 1).

This type of purposeful book selection seemed to make a big difference. For example, one day Jennifer was observing a group of students who were responding to the text *Slave Dancer* (Fox, 1991). She was pleased with the level of discussion by the group, especially because the group was composed of members who usually were not as engaged. She stated, “I think it was the book because the other two classes (who were reading the book) were also having good discussions.” This reinforced to Jennifer that sometimes the key to powerful discussions is to match the right book with the right group of readers. Sometimes she even felt it was worth taking some risks to inspire meaningful conversations. For example, for a read-aloud she read *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (Williams-Garcia, 1999), a book about teenage pregnancy. Although only sixth graders, she felt that the subject matter resonated with these students because this issue was one that plagued these students’ community. Unlike other read-alouds in which the students grudgingly listened, when Jennifer read from this text the students were captivated.

Finding the right book to inspire discussions was a valuable tool in capturing these students’ attention and in making the literature circles work. We found that we could not just give the students any text and expect meaningful conversations. We spent much time searching and listening to others to find books that resonated with our students and made them want to talk.

Coaching Students

Although one of the defining criteria for literature circles is the absence of the teacher’s direct presence, Jennifer and I had difficulty sitting back and watching

these groups deteriorate. We knew that research had shown peer-led discussion produces complex student responses and encourages higher-level thought processes than teacher-led groups (Almasi, 1995); however, Jennifer and I struggled with a way to balance the chaos of some groups when they were purely student directed and the urge to jump in to rescue these floundering and contentious discussions. One strategy we tried was to create the role of a critical coach (based on the model by Calkins, 2001). We hoped to improve the student discussions by reentering them as a critical coach to help students acquire the language practices that would make them successful in this context. Also, by entering discussions in this role we could help the students acquire the discursive skills that I had observed them struggling with (Clarke, 2004). By serving in a coaching capacity, unlike a teacher-directed capacity, we could aid the students in becoming better literature circle participants while maintaining the spirit upon which these peer-led groups were created. We also hoped that this would assist our struggling students in creating more productive and supportive communities to discuss texts. With this model in mind, I started a lunchtime book group in which I repositioned myself in these literature circles in a more coach-like role. For six weeks, the students and I chose books, created reading schedules, and met once a week to discuss the texts. During this time, I tried not to enter the group as a teacher but more as a guide to encourage productive discussions. In this new position, I was able to act as a gatekeeper and make sure that all the students’ voices were heard. I was also able to model the discursive skills needed to be successful, infuse skill development, and facilitate deeper conversations. For example, I modeled some positive group membership behaviors such as active listening (e.g., nodding my head, agreeing, saying “good point” and “hmm”), building a community (“Sue thinks Charles is the killer—who else has an opinion?”), getting others involved (“Has anyone else read anything like this?”), and building on another student’s point (“Tom was saying that this text reminded him of.... I agree because....”). I saw this reflected in my students’ discursive behaviors as they began to appropriate some of these discussion strategies in their own subsequent meetings. I also led them to make connections, find evidence in the book, and delve deeper by supporting their arguments with facts from the text. By placing myself in a coaching role I was able to assist my students

Table 1
Brief List of Books That Inspired Good Discussions in Sixth Grade

Title	Topic	Author	Notes
<i>Tears of a Tiger</i>	Realistic fiction/ teenage death and suicide	Sharon M. Draper (1994), New York: Atheneum	This book is part of Sharon Draper's Hazelwood High trilogy about inner-city teenagers. The students loved the realistic nature of this book and could make a lot of text-to-self connections with the emotions of these characters. Once we read this book, our students could not put the other ones in this series down.
<i>Double Dutch</i>	Realistic fiction/ social acceptance	Sharon M. Draper (2002), New York: Atheneum	More for a younger audience than her Hazelwood High trilogy, this book also connected to students' lives by capitalizing on the fear of not fitting in.
<i>Monster</i>	Realistic fiction/ individual choices	Walter Dean Myers (2001), New York: Amistad	This author seems to "get" what it is like to be a kid in the inner city and writes truthfully about fears, choices, and the realistic struggles that students experience. All of Dean Myers's books were hugely popular with our students.
<i>Sang Spell</i>	Science fiction	Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (1998), New York: Atheneum	Students enjoyed the strangeness of this land, set in a mysterious alternate universe, and also the drama of the main character's desperation to get home while still wanting to stay. This suspenseful book had the students captivated and intrigued by this strange community.
<i>Among the Hidden</i>	Science fiction	Margaret Peterson Haddix (2000), New York: Aladdin	The first book of this science-fiction series was wildly popular with the students. They loved to imagine this futuristic world. And, like Lois Lowery books, this one inspired many intriguing discussions about individuality and community belonging.
<i>Cirque du Freak: A Living Nightmare</i>	Horror fiction	Darren Shan (2002), New York: Little, Brown	Students got hooked on these books. We read the first as a literature circle book, and then the students took off with this series. Students related to the characters and loved the appealing nature of the horror genre.
<i>Coraline</i>	Horror fiction	Neil Gaiman (2002), New York: Scholastic	The students loved horror fiction, and this book encouraged them to debate what constitutes this genre and also kept them on the edge of their seats.
<i>Vampire Kisses</i>	Horror fiction/ social conformity	Ellen Schreiber (2003), New York: Katherine Tegen Books	Although I put this in the horror fiction genre, it is more of a story about a teenage girl not fitting in. The students loved the voice of the protagonist and related to her angst about conformity.
<i>Hush</i>	Realistic fiction/ identity and race	Jacqueline Woodson (2002), New York: Scholastic	The students liked this book because it dealt with what happens when you lose your identity and have to re-create yourself. Also, a book that inspired connections with the main character, her family, and school.
<i>Speak</i>	Realistic fiction/ identity	Laurie Halse Anderson (2001), New York: Puffin	Wonderful book about individual choices and the need to fit in. Not only did students relate to the main character and her fresh voice, but there was also the element of suspense to learn what made her stop speaking.
<i>Stargirl</i>	Realistic fiction/ social acceptance	Jerry Spinelli (2000), New York: Knopf	A wonderful book about conformity and what it means to fit in with the norm. My students related to the relationship between Leo and Stargirl and were drawn into the character's emotional struggle.
<i>The Slave Dancer</i>	Historical fiction/ slavery	Paula Fox (1991), New York: Yearling	This historical fiction book inspired many good discussions about the history of slavery and the ordeal of what it was like to be a slave.

in developing better discussion skills and begin to form productive and positive interpretative communities.

In addition to my coaching role, Jennifer began to do more modeling of productive discussions in her instruction. For example, she often led the class in discussions after the read-aloud. During these conversations, she explicitly demonstrated how to successfully enter a discussion in a nonthreatening way (by using starters like “Good point, but I see it differently because...” or “I am not sure what you mean when you say.... Could you say more?”). Although she was leading the discussion, like my coaching, we hoped that this would provide positive models the students could emulate.

New Directions for Literature Circles

Recall the opening scene as Evan preyed on Dale by holding up his worn shoes and bullying members into sharing their responses. Now compare that mental picture to another group discussion on the book *Jade Green* (Reynolds-Naylor, 2000) that took place at the end of the school year.

Dale: I have a text-to-text connection with what she (another group member) was saying. It's like *The Bad Beginning* (Snicket, 2000) when the parents died.

Crystal: Yeah, I agree with Dale that this book is like *The Bad Beginning* because they were orphans in that book just like Judith in this book.

Cassy: Yeah—that's a good connection. I hadn't thought about that.

Unlike the previous scene, here Dale makes a connection with the text and builds upon a previous member's comment. Crystal encourages Dale, and Cassy agrees with Crystal while simultaneously bolstering Dale's role in the group as someone who can make a positive contribution. The discussion continues in a positive direction.

Jen: The rule was no green—it was forbidden and when she walked through the house there was no green anywhere.

Bri'Asia: Yeah—have you seen the movie *The Village*?

All: Yeah. Yeah. (all nodding their heads in agreement)

Bri'Asia: Well red is a forbidden color in their village. So red is the color of the demon. So maybe like that in this book green attracts the demon.

Leah: Right—like how Bri'Asia said red is forbidden—whatever is wrong in this book has to do with the green.

Dale: *The Village*, like she said, forbids red because the thing comes out and kills them—maybe this will happen here with green.

Although we were pleased that the students were making connections, we were also happy that they built on one another's responses, demonstrated listening behaviors, and referred back to one another's comments. Things had definitely improved in these discussions throughout the year. Of course, the discussions weren't always harmonious. Jennifer and I still had to intervene occasionally when conversations went astray, but we did begin to see the trickle-down effect of all of our hard work to improve these books clubs. By the end of the school year, Jennifer and I were beginning to feel better about the literature circle discussions that were occurring in the classroom. We were still battling student tension, classroom interruptions, and threats to our community-building efforts; however, we could see that the changes we were making to improve this instructional practice were improving the students' conversations. We felt that by using powerful minilessons, watching ourselves on videotapes, choosing good books, and coaching students, we were giving them not only the discursive strategies that they needed to discuss books but also the ones that would help them in their interpersonal relations beyond the literature circle discussions. We were hopeful that, by learning these positive discussion strategies and creating safe and supportive communities around books in our classroom, students could then use these strategies in relationships outside of the classroom as well. As the school year closed, we knew that our literature circles still needed attention if we wanted them to be successful, but we also felt that we were beginning to find that help as we continued to construct meaningful literacy instruction.

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